



## **Risk and Resonance: Expanding the Science-Religion Dialogue**

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## **Risk and Resonance**

Editorial

**Mikkel Gabriel Christoffersen  
and Niels Henrik Gregersen**

Resonance, Risk, and Religion: Gerd Theißen  
and Hartmut Rosa on Religious Resonance

**David K. Chester, Angus M. Duncan, Rui Coutinho,  
and Nicolau Wallenstein**

The Role of Religion in Shaping Responses to Earthquakes  
and Volcanic Eruptions: A Comparison Between Southern  
Italy and the Azores, Portugal

**Michael Ruse**

Can Christians Live with Extinction, or Will They Get  
Wiped Out?

**Jan-Olav Henriksen**

The Endangered Self as a Challenge to Religion:  
Considerations with Special Reference to the Symbol 'God'

## **Book Reviews**



**Mohr Siebeck**

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# Risk and Resonance

## Expanding the Science-Religion Dialogue

The present issue of PTSc shows how the science-religion dialogue is able to expand into new areas – the interface between theology and philosophy on the one hand, and sociology and disaster studies, on the other.

We have chosen ‘Risk and Resonance’ as the covering theme. While risk primarily relates to temporal processes regarding uncertain and potentially adverse futures, resonance is mainly a spatial phenomenon. When one body absorbs the energetic effects of another body, we see a coordination of movements emerging back and forth across space. In classical systems, such constellations of resonance are stable only over limited time-spans, but at quantum level we find processes of resonance at fundamental level.

For quite some decades, the term ‘risk society’ has become familiar not least due to the work on *Risk Society* by the late German sociologist Ulrich Beck (Beck 1992, 2012 [1986]). More recently, the concept of resonance has become prominent by the work of another German sociologist, Hartmut Rosa, whose books on ‘Resonance: A Sociology of World Relations’ (Rosa 2016) and ‘The Uncontrollable’ (Rosa 2019) are currently under translation. The question is how concepts of risk and resonance relate to one another. Are they counteracting one another, so that resonance experiences offer relief from the accelerating risk awareness, or are they intertwined, so that constellations of resonance are themselves at risk, and may even produce new forms of risk?

Ulrich Beck’s central thesis of ‘self-reflexive’ risk societies builds on a specific historical narrative. First, we had the long epoch of pre-industrial societies characterized by a lack of resources, and a vulnerability to external dangers such as natural disasters. Next, we had the modern period of industrial societies in which wealth was produced using technological tools in the confidence that risks can be controlled and tamed, if only by insurance policies. Finally, we have reached our contemporary epoch of a ‘world risk society.’ According to Beck, post-industrial risk societies have suspended the hope for insurability by new technologies and new forms of warfare. Accordingly, we now live in a world in which human societies engage in decisions that have consequences for the world at large, while the risk is distributed

from the risk-takers to other people, and to future generations. Eventually, the world risk society is a “catastrophic society” (Beck 2012 [1986], 31).

Beck’s analysis is revealing in as much as it shows how the confidence in taming chance and circumstance by risk-calculus has weakened, while the awareness of unintended consequences of large-scale risk-taking is growing. The present climate crisis may exemplify how the accumulation of unintended effects have taken the upper hand in human-nature interactions. At the same time, Beck’s meta-narrative leads to a theoretical occlusion of the role of natural processes such as the persistent dynamics of geological structures and the biological drives of natural selection. What about the persistent dangers of earthquakes, volcanos, and tsunamis, not to speak of meteors? Likewise, what about large-scale extinctions of biological species before and after the dawn of humanity?

According to Ulrich Beck, we now live in an anthropogenic risk society that is shaped and defined by social decisions beyond the scope of human intentionality and will. Beck looks back on the age of pre-risk societies in a somewhat condescending perspective, seeing pre-modern human experiences of external dangers as relying on the false belief that disasters are “strokes of fate,” falling upon humanity by nature (Beck 1999, 50). Beck’s tripartite history of modernity is part of a sociological constructivism that disregards natural processes and events, and neglects the existential fact that humanity henceforth lives as an endangered species. Rather, one might say, we live *simultaneously* in a ‘pre-modern’ world of fate and danger, in a ‘modern’ view of risk-control, and in a ‘reflexive modernity’ in which we know that even when trying to prevent risks we produce new risks. Even if we live in a world of self-induced ‘anthropogenic’ risks, we also live in a world of surprises for good and for bad, including external dangers (natural hazards) and internal limitations (such as illness). We wish to control these as much as possible, knowing well that we cannot always be successful.

Within *disaster research* we find a similar emphasis on social constructivism without much input from the natural sciences. As recounted by E.L. Quarantelli, one of the initiators of disaster research, the academic field of disaster research began in the context of the cold war, mainly funded by the US Military from the 1950s to the 1960s in order to investigate the psychological and social effects of a possible use of chemical and nuclear weapons. Originally, therefore, the emphasis of disaster research was on the sudden onset of major catastrophes rather than on emergencies and epidemic diseases (Quarantelli 1987). Later on, organizational sociology has dominated the research profile of disaster research, leading to an unhealthy division of disaster studies into, on the one hand, scientific *risk-assessment* of

potential natural hazards, and a larger field of disaster research done within organizational sociology and psychology focusing on *risk-management*, on the other (Gregersen 2016).

Hartmut Rosa's contribution to the understanding of current life-worlds is centered on his thesis of *resonance* as a bidirectional movement between being affected by the external world and being emotionally involved in environmental opportunities and limitations (Rosa 2016, 279–80). Implicitly, Rosa's sociology of human world-relations questions the constructivist orthodoxy of modern sociology shared by major parts of the human sciences and theology. In Rosa's analysis, the world is not constructed on the twofold basis of human subjectivity and social decisions but is framed within a prior communion between embodied human beings and the world of nature – mediated by language, and today also by computers and other embodied extensions of the human mind. Rosa argues that the intense discussions on *social recognition* rightly point to the need for recognition as a form of social resonance. However, the dominating discourse on recognition too easily slides into fights about identity rather than opening the view for the shared resources of resonance. Resonance points to the surplus of coexistence rather than experiences of lack of recognition. While there can be infights about recognition, it is harder to imagine conflicts about resonance experiences, since they belong to the gratuitous sources of human experience (Rosa 2016, 331–35). In this context, Rosa points to art and music, and to nature and religion, as important spheres of resonance in contemporary society. Religion is a response to such atmospheres, while at the same time cultivating attitudes of expectation regarding a deep-seated resonance (*Tiefenresonanz*) between human life and its environment (Rosa 2016, 441).

The opening article, 'Resonance, Risk, and Religion,' written for this issue by Mikkel Gabriel Christoffersen and Niels Henrik Gregersen, establishes a conversation between the theologian Gerd Theißen and Hartmut Rosa. As early as the 1970s, Theißen developed the idea of resonance being fundamental to religion. Christoffersen and Gregersen argue that Rosa offers further resources for developing the concept of religious resonance, not least by showing how religious experiences are able to deal with dissonance no less than with experiences of consonance.

The three following articles come out of the concluding conference, 'Endangered Selves and Societies: Theologies of Tragedies and Disasters' of Copenhagen University's *Excellence Program on Changing Disasters* (2014–2017).<sup>1</sup> In their contribution on 'The Role of Religion in Shaping Responses

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1 From this conference, another set of more theologically oriented papers has been

to Earthquakes and Volcanic Eruptions,' David K. Chester, Angus M. Duncan, Rui Coutinho, and Nicolau Wallenstein point to the inner division in disaster studies between hazard analysts on the one hand, and sociologists and psychologists on the other. However, they also highlight the more recent trend of including cultural and religious perspectives within disasters studies. Religion turns out to be a vital element in cultural responses to disasters. In their detailed article, David Chester and his colleagues collect and combine a series of anthropological observations showing that not only geography and local history, but also different intellectual backgrounds and modes of ritual practice shape religious disaster responses to natural hazards. Differences appear within one and the same religion: The disaster responses among Southern Italy Catholics differ markedly from the Catholicism of the Portuguese Azores, not least because of the combination of naturalist explanation and Catholic theology on the Azores.

Michael Ruse, historian and philosopher of biology, asks the controversial question, 'Can Christians Live with Extinction, or Will They Get Wiped Out?' Debates on the extinction of species have been going on since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as Ruse reminds us. George Cuvier's catastrophism gave way to Charles Lyell's uniformitarian view of laws of geology. Similarly, Charles Darwin was a deist at the time of writing *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin 2003 [1859]). Processes of selection go on unhindered, and God is neither involved in nor concerned about the special creation and extinction of species. In the twentieth century, paleobiologists such as J. John Sepkoski held that the evolution of form and structure is prior to adaption and selection, thus enabling the view that mass extinction tends to be good for the evolving biosphere. While existing species may be wiped out, new forms of life will appear. This optimistic evolutionary teleology even finds expression among evolutionists such as E. O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins. Against this background, Ruse asks his contemporary Christians whether they can imagine the extinction of the human species too, and what next? Ruse points to several options in a playful essayistic style, which nonetheless takes the form of a serious thought experiment.

The series of papers concludes with the philosopher-theologian Jan-Olav Henriksen's essay, 'The Endangered Self as a Challenge to Religion.' In line with his recent book, *Religion as Orientation and Transformation: A Maximalist Theory*, Henriksen points to the orientational, transformative and self-reflective value of religion in leading a human life (Henriksen 2017,

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published in the special issue on 'Disaster and Tragedy' in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56:4 (2017).

103–30). Based on Heinz Kohut's view of the human self as building upon an emotional affirmation as well as encouragement and crisis, he points to the twofold role of the symbol 'God' as giving a continuous sense of a safe inner 'selfobject' and a confrontation with what the self is not yet, thus facilitating a more mature human self. The psychological function of God as the inner selfobject consists in its potential role for integrating the supportive grounding of selfhood and the confrontation with an idealized other, both represented within the selfobject. While this idealizing pole points to the limitation of the human self (never able to fully unite with 'God'), it spurs on the creativity of the human mind by opening the mindset for new options. In as much as the symbol 'God' provides a sense of safety related to experiences of regularity, it also enables hope and encouragement in face of frustrating adversities. Henriksen's essay may thus be taken as a reminder that resonance experiences must be able to integrate experiences of dissonance as well. Moreover, resonance takes place not only between humans and with non-human nature, but also within the two poles of the human self: the sense of safety and the sense of insecurity.

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